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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 15

### **Leisure reading among adolescents in Beijing**

by

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# **Leisure reading among adolescents in Beijing**

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## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

The present study investigates in more detail the reading behaviour and the reading attitudes among adolescents in Beijing. The focus is on leisure-time reading by adolescents in secondary education.

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November 2011

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## 1. Introduction

Reading behaviour among adolescents is a frequent object of study, since many teachers, policy makers, and sometimes also parents are of the opinion that adolescents spend too little of their spare time on reading. These social agents frequently argue that reading behaviour influences reading proficiency. The amount of free reading done in adolescence might explain differences in vocabulary and reading proficiency and ensuing differences in educational careers. Recently, Hui (2007) reported that a survey on *Reading and Buying by People across China* found that the national reading rate for the first time had fallen below 50% and had been on the decline for six consecutive years. Regular Chinese readers make up some 5% of the total population. Instead of enjoying reading, most Chinese students hate reading from a young age (Hui 2007). The present study investigates in more detail the reading behaviour and the reading attitudes among adolescents in Beijing. The focus is on leisure-time reading by adolescents in secondary education.

## 2. A model for explaining reading behaviour

In this study, we used the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991) as a general framework to model the important determinants of reading frequency: reading attitude, social norms (opinions of important others), and reading proficiency that is part of the perceived behavioural control (see Figure 1).

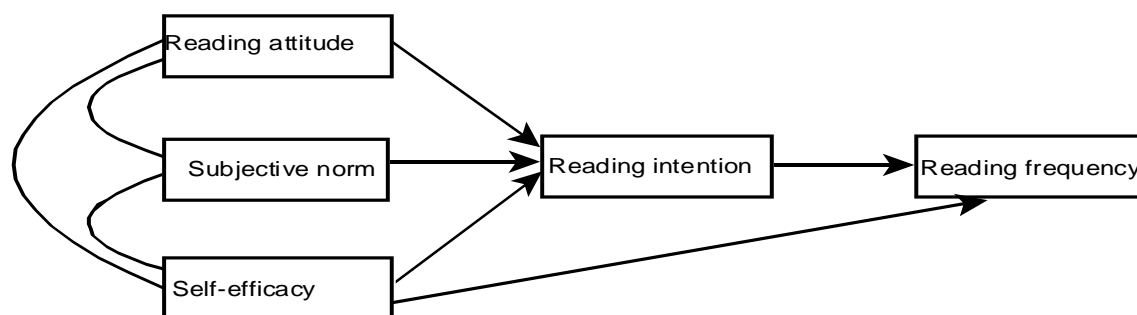


Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991)

In designing effective reading programmes, one should know what factors are most influential. In most studies, reading attitude comes out as being the most important factor. However, most of these studies are conducted in western societies with an individualistic culture. Chinese culture is much more collectivistic. As a result of this, the effect of the subjective norm may be much larger.

In order to explore this suggestion in more depth, we will explain the three hypothetical constructs in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and subsequently go into the findings from the survey carried out in Beijing.

## **2.1 Reading attitude**

A person's reading attitude is based on direct and indirect experiences with reading and can be viewed as a learned predisposition to react consistently favourably or unfavourably to the activity of 'reading in one's leisure time'. A more formal definition of reading attitude is "*... a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related*" Allport (1935: p. 810). A key characteristic of an attitude is that it is based on experiences with the attitude object, in this case reading storybooks. These experiences are gained through direct as well as indirect contact. Direct experiences arise from being engaged in the reading activity oneself, while the indirect experiences have been acquired through primary and secondary socialisation and reflect experiences felt by others (family members, peer group, friends, and teachers) and communicated (verbally as well as non-verbally) to the individual. These indirect experiences give the students an idea of what to pay attention to when they are reading a book.

This learned predisposition consists of a utilitarian and a hedonistic part (Batra & Athola 1990; Voss et al 2003; Stokmans 2005; Stokmans 2007). The utilitarian reading attitude is related to the problem-solving capacities involved in reading story books and concerns the belief that reading a book yields something useful. Useful for school that is, for one's school career (school function) or useful for one's further personal development (development function). Hedonistic reading attitudes refer to the fun, pleasure, and relaxation (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982) immediately experienced when a storybook is read. The hedonistic reading

attitude concerns the belief that reading books is a pleasant activity, because the reader amuses him/herself (pleasure function), or, dives into the story, sympathizes with the main character in the story (empathy function).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour postulates a positive relation between reading attitude and free reading: the stronger the reading attitude, the higher the expected value of reading, the stronger the probability that the individual will read at a particular point in time, and the higher the reading frequency.

## **2.2 Subjective norm**

The subjective norm construct concerns the social pressure perceived by a person to engage in reading as a leisure activity. It reflects the individual's perception of the extent to which others who are important to him/her feel that one should engage in the behaviour. Thus each social group that is important to the adolescent contributes to the subjective norm. In the case of free reading, three important social groups are usually explored (Stalpers 2005): family members, teachers and, the peer-group.

For each of these social groups, the subjective norm consists of two aspects. Firstly, there are the perceived opinions and beliefs about free reading held by the group. These can be expressed by verbally approving or disapproving of free reading (explicit norm), or by actual behaviour linked to the activity of reading (implicit norm). In the case of an implicit norm, socialisation has its influence through 'imitation'. The second aspect of the subjective norm regards the motivation to comply with the norm held by relevant others. We expect Chinese adolescents to have a strong motivation to comply with their family's wishes, seeing as the Chinese show high scores on the individualism-collectivism dimension in characterizations of cultures (Hofstede 2001). This dimension refers to the prescriptions (prescribed rules and views) and expectations a group might have about the relationship between the individual (the attitudinal component) and the collective (subjective norm component). Members of individualistic cultures tend to define themselves in terms of their independence from and autonomy in the group and are socialized to value individual freedoms and individual expressions, while collectivistic cultures emphasize the maintenance of harmony, and the importance of sticking with the group, even when doing so comes at considerable personal costs. There are suggestions that members of collectivistic cultures show more of a tendency



to conform than do members of individualistic cultures (Bond & Smith 1996), and that members of collectivistic cultures are less likely to seek differentiation from others than members of individualistic cultures (Heine, Markus & Kitayama 1999; Kim & Markus 1999).

### **2.3 Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy (cf. Bandura 1977), or perceived behavioural control (Ajzen 1991) concerns the self-judgment on the part of the adolescent to be able to perform the intended behaviour. It is not an objective characteristic, but the student's perception of the availability of resources and opportunities for free reading. In this context, resources refer to the person's self-assessed reading proficiency, while opportunities are conceptualized as the availability of 'suitable' books (Stalpers, 2005).

The self-judgment is directed towards the presence or absence of required sources and opportunities for reading in one's leisure time. The sources and opportunities cover reading proficiency as well as the 'appropriateness' of books (Stalpers 2005).

Research indicates that the attitudinal component explains most of the differences found in reading behaviour (van Schooten & de Glopper 2002; Stokmans 1999). Similar results are found in other research domains (Ajzen 1991; Terry & Hogg 1996; Trafimow & Finlay 1996). These general findings are not surprising if one realizes that all these studies were conducted in western societies with low scores on the dimension of individualism-collectivism. For these societies, the lagged effect of the subjective norm is largely accounted for in the attitude component. The current effect of the subjective norm reflects the fact that one's social environment can facilitate or inhibit the behaviour irrespective of the attitude. This facilitating effect will be larger in collectivistic societies.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research questions

In the school year 2009/2010, a representative survey was carried out among adolescents in Beijing. The aim of the study was to unravel and explain leisure reading behaviour among secondary school students. More specifically, the following research questions are distinguished:

- What is the amount of reading done by Beijing school students?
- How do Beijing students feel about reading books as a leisure activity?
- How can their leisure reading be explained?
- What practical recommendations can be given?

#### 3.2. Research population

In the Beijing reading survey, 643 students from 7 schools participated. Figure 2 shows the geographical location of the schools:



Figure 2: Geographical location of the 7 schools in the Beijing reading survey.

Four schools, comprising 378 students, were located in the urban districts of Haidan (2 schools), Dongcheng and Xicheng. Three schools, comprising 265 students, were situated in the rural districts of Huai Rou, Shunyi and Miyun. Twenty-five per cent (150 students) of the research population were boarding students, i.e., staying at school during the school week. Seventy-five per cent (461 students) of the research population went home each day after school. The students were also asked how much time they spent on travelling from home to school and back. Their answers are summarized in Table 1.

Time per day	Travelling from home to school and vice versa	
Less than 30 minutes	83	15%
30-60 minutes	132	24%
1 hour	209	38%
1 hour – 1 ½ hours	43	8%
2 hours	76	14%
more than 2 hours	13	2%
Unknown	86	-

*Table 1: Time spend per day on travelling from home to school and back.*

On average, the students spent one hour each day ( $sd=.67$ ) travelling from home to school and back. Some students (16%) spent 2 hours or more travelling. There were 231 boys and 391 girls (no information on gender was available for the remaining 21 students). Table 2 shows the distribution of age and grades among the research population. The students were in Grades 7 – 11. Their average age was 14.94 ( $sd = 1.83$ ).

Age	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Total
11 yrs	0	1	0	0	0	1
12 yrs	26	6	4	0	0	36
13 yrs	71	38	10	0	0	119
14 yrs	6	133	0	0	0	139
15 yrs	1	96	19	1	0	117
16 yrs	0	15	61	7	0	83
17 yrs	0	0	24	25	13	62
18 yrs	0	0	1	7	51	59
19 yrs	0	0	0	0	12	12
20 yrs	0	0	0	0	4	4
Total	104	289	119	40	80	632

*Table 2: Distribution of age and grades among the students*

### 3.3 The questionnaire

Taking the experience gained from large-scale leisure reading surveys amongst adolescents in the Netherlands (cf. Stokmans 2007, Stokmans & Broeder 2009) as a point of departure, a questionnaire was developed and adapted to the Beijing context. The questionnaire consisted of 34 carefully selected and tried-out questions in two languages: Mandarin-Chinese and English.

In the introductory part of the questionnaire it is explicitly explained that the focus is on leisure reading. When the questionnaire is filled out, the students are asked to keep in mind that all the questions are about ‘storybooks’ that they read for pleasure, and not about school textbooks, or any other school books, or books about hobbies or magazines. The questions are about books that tell a fictional story, like thrillers, detectives, adolescent novels, romantic books, books they read for pleasure in their spare time. It is not about books that they have to read for school. Also, it is explicitly stated that all the questions in the questionnaire are about reading in Chinese, and not about reading in other languages such as English.

The 34 questions of the questionnaire are organised in the following information blocks:

- Reading behaviour of the student and of others
- Reading attitude of the student and of others
- Appropriateness of the available books
- Opinions of others (subject norm)
- Time spent in an average week/on an average day at school, on one’s job and on household activities.
- Indication of reading proficiency of the student

In the first part and in the final part of the questionnaire, each student is asked to provide some background information. This concerns name, grade, school, country of birth (of students and parents), highest level of education of each parent, language(s) used at home. The information blocks of the questionnaire will now be discussed in detail.

### *Reading behaviour*

The construct of reading behaviour is operationalised through four questions.

- reading frequency (*How often do you read storybooks?* and *When was the last time you read a storybook?*)
- reading quantity (*How many books have you read (how many do you read per week/month/year)?* and *How much time do you spend on reading storybooks?*).

For each of the four questions the students could choose between six answers, ranging from “very little/few/rarely/recently” to “very much/many/often/long ago”. Because the response options are not the same for each of the 6 questions, for the scale construction the z-scores of the variables were analysed. This implies that in the total score each question is weighted to the same degree. The internal consistency of the scale for reading behaviour is adequate (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ ).

### *Reading attitude*

The construct of reading attitude is operationalised through a global measure and a belief-based measure. With the global attitude measure the students are asked: *How do you feel about reading as a leisure time activity?* On a five-point scale with 21 word pairs (semantic differential), they indicate their pertinent hedonistic and utilitarian attitude. Through a statistical analysis two items were deleted. The final attitude measures consisted of 10 word pairs for the global hedonistic scale and 9 word pairs for the utilitarian scale (see Table 3). The internal consistency of the final reading attitude scales is good (hedonistic: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .90$ ; utilitarian: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ).

10 word pairs Hedonistic attitude scale	10 word pairs Utilitarian attitude scale
pleasant - boring	interesting - not interesting
exciting - dull	informative - not informative
enjoyable - irritating	necessary - unnecessary
nice - unattractive	valuable - useless
unpleasant - relaxing	worthwhile - a waste of time
attractive - unattractive	important - unimportant
good - bad	to impress others - can’t do without it
fun - no fun	wise - foolish
sensible - stupid	pointless - useful
amusing - not amusing	perfect - wrong
awful - delightful	

*Table 3: Items of the hedonistic and utilitarian attitude measure scales.*

The belief-based attitude measure consisted of 14 statements representing possible consequences of reading. The statements were partly based on the work of Lewis & Teale (1980) and Greaney & Neuman (1990), and validated further by Stokmans (2007) for administering to youngsters. The following attitude functions are distinguished:

- Pleasure function: reading is a pleasant activity because the reader amuses him/herself (four statements)
- Empathy function: reading is a pleasant activity because the reader can dive into the story. One can enter another world, sympathize with the main character in the story and experience adventure (three statements).
- School function: this function relates to the value placed on the role of reading for attaining educational or vocational success for managing one's life (four statements).
- Development function: this function relates to the value placed on reading to gain insight into self, others, and/or life in general. It also incorporates moral aspects (three statements).

The first two functions refer to the hedonistic attitude (reading as experience) and the latter two functions refer to the utilitarian attitude (reading as study). The students have to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with each statement (a five-point scale appended with a 'don't know' answer category). The belief-based reading attitudes measures are less internally consistent (pleasure function: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ; empathy function: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ; school function: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ; development function: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .62$ ).

#### *Appropriateness of the available books*

There were three statements that establish whether the books available are appropriate, that is, the degree to which the student feels that the books are for youngsters like him-/herself: *Are there many nice books available? Are there enough nice books available? Books that really interest the student?* The students have to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with each statement (a five-point scale appended with a 'don't know' answer category). The internal consistency of the book offer scale was adequate (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ).

### *Subjective norm: opinions of others*

The opinions of family (father, mother, brother/sister), best friend and teachers was established as follows:

- The implicit norm, i.e., what the others do themselves. This concerns: talking about a storybook, telling others what books are fun to read, giving a storybook as a present. and, whether the other family members read storybooks at lot themselves. There were four answer options: (almost) never, sometimes, regularly, often;
- The explicit norm, i.e., how the others feel about reading as a leisure activity. There were five answer categories: one of the best/worst activities.
- Compliance with the norm was established through one question: Do you let the opinions of your (family members/teachers/best friend) about reading influence you personally? (a five-point scale: not at all / very much).

The internal consistency of the implicit scales varied: poor internal consistency for the parents scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ), good internal consistency for the peers scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ) and, adequate internal consistency for the teachers scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ).

### *Activities in an average week and on an average day*

The students were also asked how much time they spent on activities in three domains: in the school domain (i.e., time spent at school and doing homework), in the work domain (i.e., one's job), and in the household domain (e.g., helping with the laundry, cooking, etc.). To be excluded were activities such as sleeping, eating, and personal care (e.g., brushing one's teeth, taking a shower, etc.).

### *Reading proficiency*

The operationalisation of reading proficiency was assessed in two ways:. Firstly, the self-assessed proficiency: How good does the student consider him-/herself to be compared to the others in the class (7 categories: the best/worst of my class) and an indication of one's own reading proficiency in a score on a scale from 1 to 10 (10 being excellent). And, secondly: the score on the last Chinese literacy course

The internal consistency of the scale that measured the difficulty of school books is good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ). The internal consistency of the self-evaluation scale is insufficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .54$ ).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Spare time activities

Table 4 gives an overview of the number of days in an average week that the students spent on ‘school’ activities (time at school), ‘job’ activities and, ‘household’ activities.

	‘School’ activity		‘Job’ activity		‘Household’ activity	
None	-	-	557	96%	73	13%
1 day	2	-	14	1%	145	25%
2 days	-	-	5	-	174	30%
3 days	4	-	1	-	59	10%
4 days	1	-	0	-	10	2%
5 days	242	42%	6	-	32	6%
6 days	167	29%	1	-	7	1%
7 days	159	28%	1	-	80	14%
Unknown	68	-	58	-	63	-

*Table 4: School, work, and household activities in an average week.*

An overview of the number of hours on an average day for each domain is given in Table 5.

	‘School’ activity		‘Job’ activity		‘Household’ activity	
Less than one hour	-	-	562	96%	234	41%
1 hour	1	-	16	3%	206	36%
2 hours	3	-	1	-	115	20%
3 hours	9	1%	1	-	16	3%
4 hours	4	-	2	-	3	-
5 hours	3	-	1	-	1	-
6 hours	13	2%	2	-	-	-
7 hours	22	4%	-	-	-	-
8 hours	168	31%	1	-	-	-
9 hours	79	15%	-	-	-	-
10 hours	101	18%	-	-	-	-
11 hours	19	4%	-	-	-	-
12 hours	50	9%	-	-	-	-
More than 12 hours	82	15%	-	-	-	-
Unknown	89	-	57	-	67	-
Total number of students	643	-	643	-	643	-

*Table 5: School, work, and household activities on an average day.*



### *School domain*

On average, the students spent 5.8 days per week ( $sd=5.8$ ) and 10 hours per day on school-related activities. More specifically, 42% of the students reported that in an average week they spent 5 days on school-related activities, one third of the students report that they spent 6 days on school activities, and one third report that they spent 7 days on school activities. Table 5 shows that almost one quarter of the students on an average day spent 12 hours or more on school-related activities.

### *Work domain*

In contrast to the school domain, nearly all students reported that in an average week they did not spend a day on work-related activities. And also for their average day, 87% of the students say that they have no work-related activities.

### *Household domain*

Activities in the household domain take up on average 2.5 days per week ( $sd=2.18$ ) and on average 1 hour per day ( $sd=1.0$ ). For the household domain, a more differentiated picture emerges. On the one hand, 13% of the students reported that they did not spend a day on activities in the household domain, whereas 14% of the students report that every day they carry out activities in the household domain.

## **4.2. Differences in reading behaviour**

### ***Reading frequency***

An overview of the reading frequency reported by the students (*How often do you read storybooks?* and *When was the last time you read a book?*) is given in Table 6.

<i>How often do you read storybooks in your leisure time?</i>			<i>When did you last read a storybook?</i>		
Almost every day	230	37%	1 week ago or less	443	71%
At intervals of a few days	226	36%	2 - 3 weeks ago	96	15%
At intervals of a week	83	13%	About 1 month ago	52	9%
At an interval of a month	45	7%	About 2 - 3 months ago	20	3%
At intervals of a few months	32	5%	About 4-6 months ago	1	1%
At intervals of 6 months or more	14	2%	More than 6 months ago	1	1%
Unknown	13	-	Unknown	15	-

*Table 6: Frequency of reading behaviour among Beijing students (N total = 643)*

Table 6 shows that students reported highly frequent reading behaviour. More than one-third of the students spent time reading storybooks almost every day. 49% of the students read storybooks at intervals of a few days or a week. And as many as 71% of the students reported having read a storybook one week ago or less.

### ***Reading quantity***

Table 7 gives an overview of the reading quantity reported by the students (*How many books?* and *How much time is spent reading?*).

<i>How many storybooks do you read in your spare time?</i>			<i>How much time did you spend reading storybooks last week?</i>		
1 or more books a week	208	33%	more than 5 hours	96	15%
1 book every 2 - 3 weeks	187	30%	3 - 5 hours	104	17%
1 book a month	135	21%	1 ½ - 3 hours	118	19%
1 book every 2 - 3 months	62	9%	1 - 1 ½ hours	97	15%
1 book every 4 - 6 months	21	3%	½ - 1 hour	115	18%
Less than 1 book every 6 months	8	1%	½ or less	57	9%
		-	No time	42	7%
Unknown	15		Unknown	15	-

*Table 7: Quantity of reading behaviour among Beijing students (N total = 643)*

The students also reported a high quantity of reading behaviour. About one third of the students reported reading one book or more each week (33% of the students) and almost another third said they read one storybook every 2 – 3 weeks. 15% of the students spent more

than 5 hours reading story books in the previous week. 17% of the students spent 3 – 5 hours reading storybooks in the previous week.

The general picture that emerges is that the students in the Beijing survey reported reading a lot of books and reading a lot of the time in their leisure time. A further analysis provides specific answers to the question who reads more. Table 8 gives the outcomes of a comparative analysis of the reading behaviour (reading frequency and reading quantity) for the following factors: school phase, gender, boarding vs. non-boarding students, and regional location.

		Ntotal	M	sd	t-value	Sign
School	Middle	391	0,11	0,70	4,44	< 0,01
	High	241	-0,18	0,97		
Gender	Boy	227	-0,15	0,83	-4,46	< 0,05
	Girl	386	0,12	0,73		
Boarding	Boarding	148	-0,02	0,80	- 0,86	> 0,10 (NS)
	Non-board.	454	0,05	0,77		
Region	Rural	265	-0,04	0,75	1.116	NS
	Urban	378	0,028	0,80		

*Table 8: Differences in reading behaviour for the factors school, gender, boarding vs. non-boarding, and regional location of the school*

On the basis of the data presented in Table 8, some remarkable observations can be noted in reading behaviour (i.e., reading frequency and reading quantity) for each of the pertinent factors:

- School: Secondary school students read significantly more often and more storybooks than students in higher education. The latter difference can be related to age ( $t = \dots$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). With increasing age, the time spent on reading storybooks decreases.
- Gender: Girls read significantly more often and significantly more storybooks than boys do.
- Boarding: There is no significant difference in reading behaviour between the boarding students and the non-boarding students.

Region: Also with respect to the location of the school, no significant difference in reading behaviour can be found between the students from schools in urban regions versus the students from schools in suburban areas.

### 4.3 Reading attitude

#### *Hedonistic reading attitudes*

The hedonistic reading attitudes of the students are established using a global measure and two reading functions measures (i.e., pleasure function, and empathy function). The findings are summarized in Figure 3.

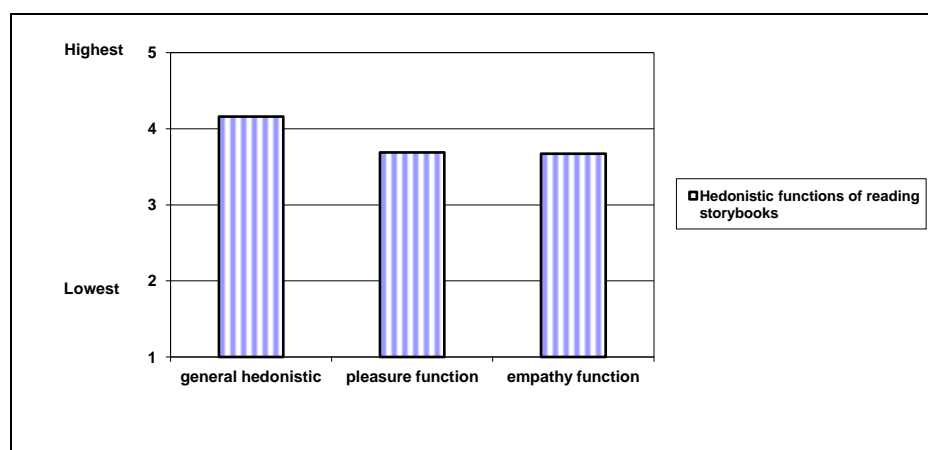


Figure 3: *Hedonistic attitudes of the students towards reading*

In general, the students have high positive hedonistic attitudes towards reading. A more detailed picture emerges from an analysis on the factors school phase, gender, (non-) boarding, and regional location of the school of the students (see Table 9). For the hedonistic reading attitudes the following observations can be made:

School: Younger students (from middle school) have higher positive hedonistic reading attitudes than older students (from high school). However this difference is not significant.

Gender: Also girls have higher positive hedonistic reading attitudes than boys, and this is a significant differences. In other words, it is clear that much more so than boys, girls like to read storybooks for fun.

Boarding: There are only small non-significant differences in hedonistic reading attitude between boarding and non-boarding students.

Region: Students of urban schools have higher positive hedonistic reading attitudes than students from rural school. For the pleasure function and the empathy function significant differences can be noted.

School phase	Middle school	Higher-type school	t-value	sign
Hedonistic global	4.2053 (.65769)	4.0808 (.69371)	2.236	p < 0,05
Pleasure function	3.7015 (.80286)	3.6773 (.80562)	.370	N.S.
Empathy function	3.7252 (.83625)	3.5953 (.90183)	1.849	p < 0,10
Gender	Girl	Boy		
Hedonistic global	4.2876 (.62268)	3.9718 (.70382)	-5.497	p < 0,01
Pleasure function	3.8297 (.74550)	3.5127 (.83879)	-4.726	p < 0,01
Empathy function	3.8073 (.80289)	3.4810 (.90945)	-4.490	p < 0,01
Boarding	Boarding	Non-boarding		
Hedonistic global	4.1025 (.66635)	4.1990 (.67046)	1.493	N.S.
Pleasure function	3.8156 (.68376)	3.6694 (.82596)	-2.154	p < 0,05
Empathy function	3.7998 (.71764)	3.6390 (.89869)	-2.225	p < 0,05
Regional location	Rural	Urban		
Hedonistic global	4.1247 (.68994)	4.1811 (.66235)	1.022	N.S.
Pleasure function	3.5537 (.78394)	3.7897 (.80355)	3.695	p < 0,01
Empathy function	3.5963 (.82657)	3.7314 (.88507)	1.950	p = 0,05

Table 9: Differences in hedonistic reading attitude for differences in school phase, gender, (non-)boarding), and school region (average and s.d.).

#### *Utilitarian reading attitudes*

The utilitarian reading attitudes of the students are also established using a global measure and two reading functions measures (i.e., school function, and development function). The findings are summarized in Figure 4.

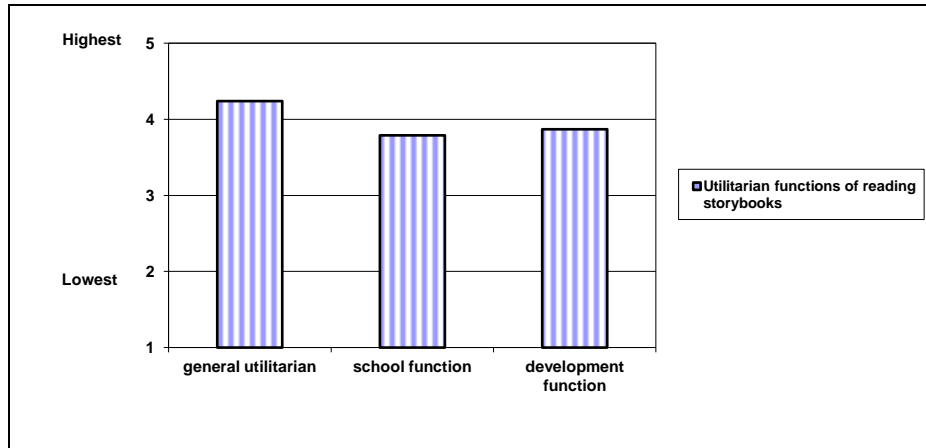


Figure 4: Utilitarian attitudes of the students towards reading

In general, the students also have high positive utilitarian attitudes towards reading. A comparison with the hedonistic attitudes (see Figure 3 and Figure 4) reveals that the utilitarian attitudes are even higher. A more detailed picture arises from an analysis on the factors of school phase, gender, (non-) boarding, and regional location of the school of the students (see Table 10).

School phase	Middle school	Higher-type school	t-value	sign
Utilitarian global	4.2323 (.67921)	4.2480 (.63756)	-.285	N.S.
School function	3.8495 (.72040)	3.7015 (.70968)	2.540	p < 0,01
Development function	3.8988 (.77898)	3.8313 (.73909)	1.085	N.S.
Gender	Girl	Boy		
Utilitarian global	4.3563 (.59922)	4.0690 (.71607)	-4.999	p < 0,01
School function	3.8861 (.66865)	3.6739 (.77972)	-3.447	p < 0,01
Development function	3.9735 (.71044)	3.7394 (.80767)	-3.636	p < 0,01
Boarding	Boarding	Non-boarding		
Utilitarian global	4.1446 (.66042)	4.2946 (.64388)	2.403	p < 0,05
School function	3.7928 (.63536)	3.8090 (.74270)	.240	N.S.
Development function	3.8622 (.66013)	3.8985 (.78442)	.556	N.S.
Regional location	Rural	Urban		
Utilitarian global	4.2047 (.72306)	4.2612 (.61907)	1.014	N.S.
School function	3.7929 (.73591)	3.7933 (.70857)	0.007	N.S.
Development function	3.8718 (.77228)	3.8741 (.75951)	0.037	N.S.

Table 10: Differences in utilitarian reading attitude for differences in school phase, gender, (non-)boarding), and school region (average and s.d).

For the utilitarian reading attitudes the following observations can be made:

- School: For the younger students (from middle school) significant higher positive utilitarian reading attitudes can be noted with respect to the school function.
- Gender: The girls also have higher positive utilitarian reading attitudes than boys, and this too is a significant difference. In other words, it is clear that girls not only like to read storybooks for fun more than boys do but they also consider reading a more useful activity than boys do.
- Boarding: There are only small non-significant differences in utilitarian reading attitude between boarding and non-boarding students.
- Region: Students of urban schools also have higher positive utilitarian reading attitudes than students from rural schools. Although no significant differences can be noted.

#### 4.4 Social norms

With respect to the subjective norm of the students (i.e., the perceived social norm) a distinction is made between the implicit norm and the explicit norm. The students were asked to specify separately the subjective norm provided by their family members, by their best friends and by their teachers.

##### *Social norm provided by family members*

Figure 5 specifies the social norm provided by the family members. How often do family members talk with a student about a storybook, how often do they tell others what books are fun to read, or give a storybook as a present.

According to the students, their family members do not talk to them about storybooks very often: *sometimes* (for 65% of the students) and *almost never* (for 22% of the students). Telling others what books are fun to read happens *sometimes* in 52% of the families and *often* in 26% of the families. Giving a storybook as a present to a family member does not happen very much, that is, *sometimes* in 44% of the families and *almost never* in 39% of the families.

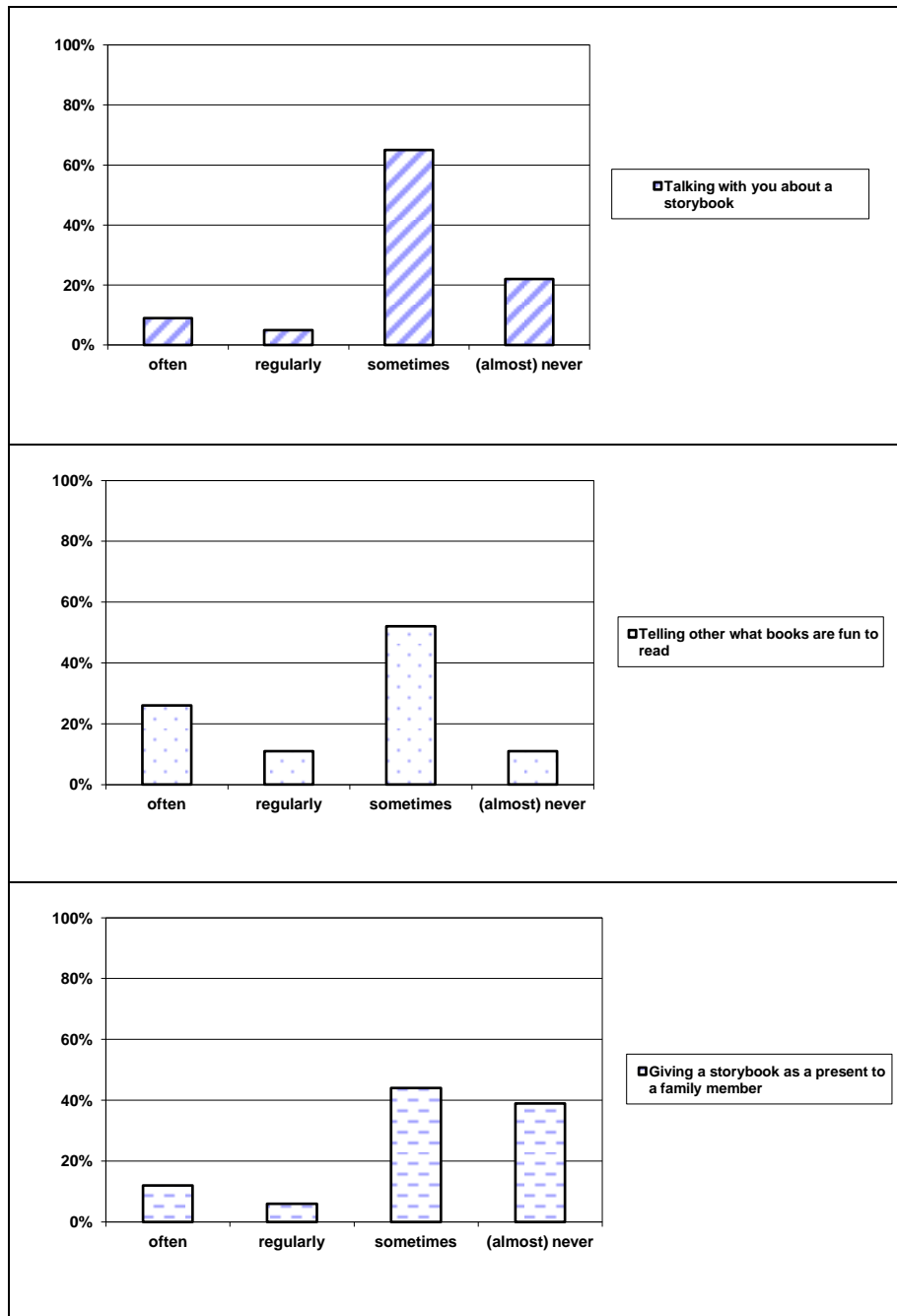


Figure 5: Perceived implicit social norm of the family members  
 (“How often does this happen in your family”)

The students were also asked which of their family members read storybooks a lot. An overview of the answers to this question is given in Figure 6.



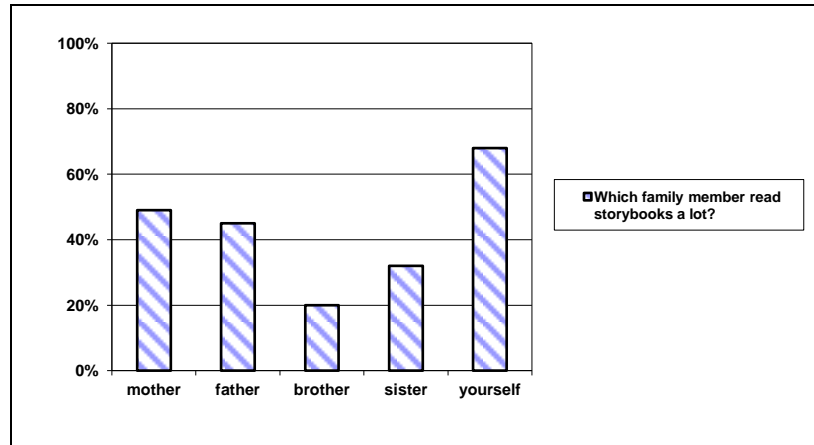


Figure 6: *Perceived implicit social norm of the family members*  
 (“Which of your family members read storybooks a lot?”)

Nearly half of the parents read storybooks a lot (49% of the mothers, and 45% of the fathers). A lower percentage can be noted for the brothers (20%) and the sisters (32%) of the students. A remarkably high number of students (68%) reported that they themselves read storybooks a lot.

When the students were asked about how their family members feel about reading as a leisure activity, a remarkably positive picture emerged (see Figure 7). Most of the parents consider reading books a *good* leisure activity (62%) or *one of the best* leisure activities (18%).

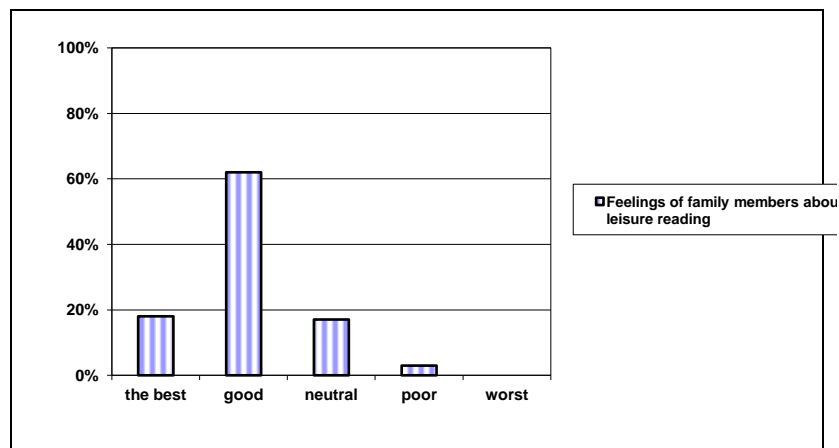
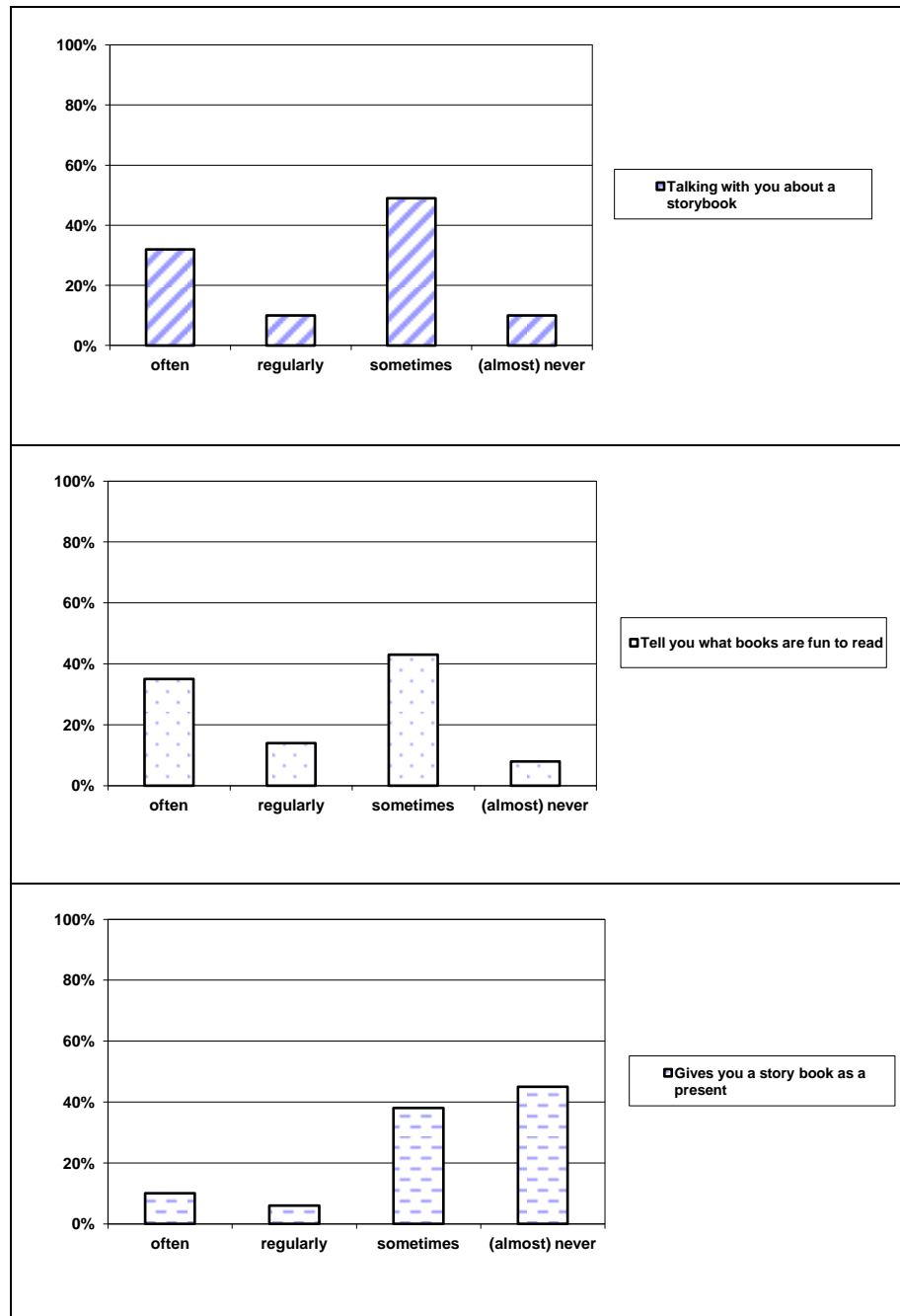


Figure 7: *Perceived explicit social norm of the family members*

*(“How do your family members feel about reading books as a leisure activity?”)*

*Social norm provided by best friends*

Figure 8 specifies the social norm provided by the students’ best friends, again for the three leisure reading aspects: talking about a storybook, telling others about books and, giving a storybook as a present.



*Figure 8: Perceived implicit social norm set by best friends*

(“How often do your best friends do this?”)

Most students do not talk to their best friends about storybooks a lot: *sometimes* (for 49% of the students) and *almost never* (for 10% of the students). However, a relatively large group of students (32%) reported that they *often* talk with their best friends about storybooks. Also with respect to the degree to which their best friends tell them which storybooks are fun to read this difference can be noted, i.e., on the one hand there is a group of best friends (35%) who *often* tell what storybook is fun to read, and on the other there is a group of best friends (39%) who *sometimes* tell what storybook is fun to read. The students’ best friends do not often give them storybooks as a present, i.e., *sometimes* 38% and *almost never* 45%.

The students were also asked whether their best friend read storybooks him/herself. An overview of the answers to this question is given in Figure 9.

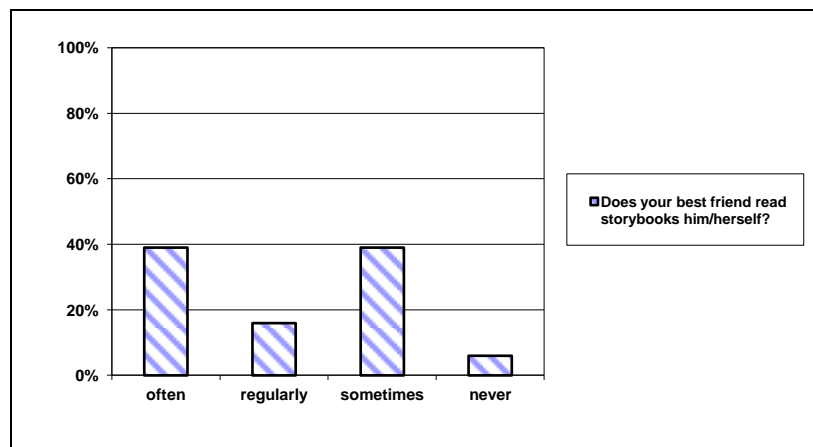
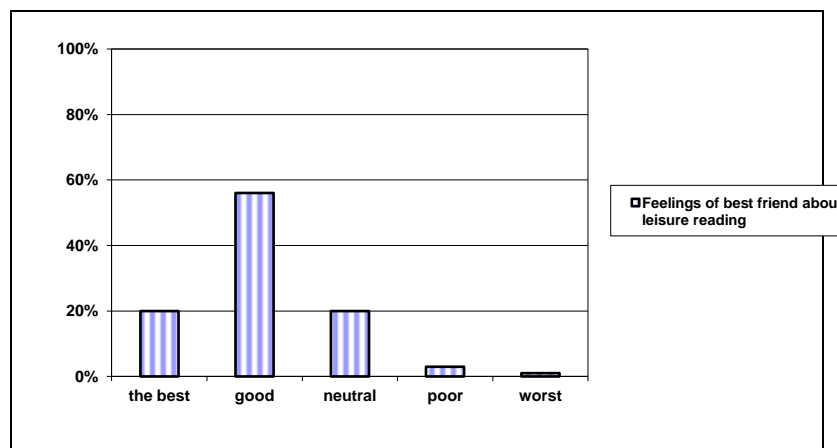


Figure 9: Perceived implicit social norm of the best friends  
(“How often does your best friend read storybooks him/herself?”)

With respect to their best friends, the students can be split up into two main groups: 39% of the best friends *often* read storybooks, and 39% of the best friends *sometimes* read storybooks.

When the students were asked about how their best friends feel about reading as a leisure activity, a positive picture emerged (see Figure 10). Most of the best friends consider reading books a *good* leisure activity (56%) or *one of the best* leisure activities (20%).

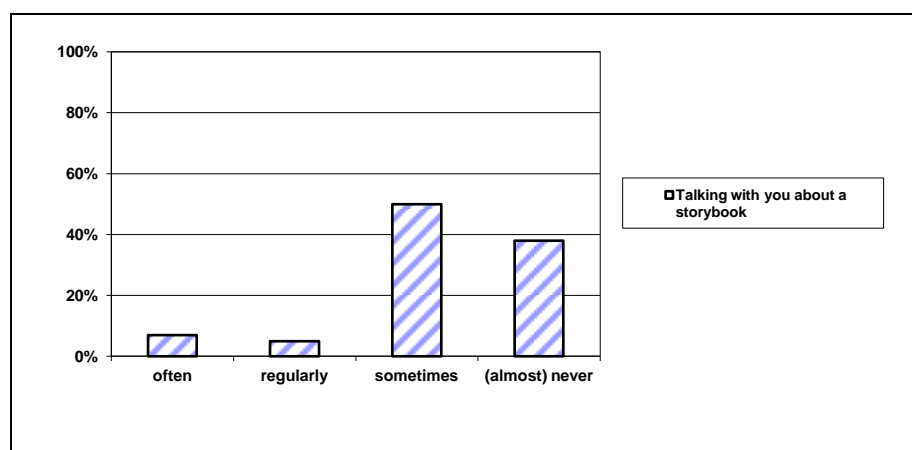


*Figure 10: Perceived explicit social norm of best friends*

*(“How does your best friend feel about reading books as a leisure activity?”)*

#### *Social norm provided by the teachers*

Figure 11 specifies the social norm provided by the teachers. How often do teachers talk with a student about a storybook, tell others what books are fun to read, or give someone a storybook as a present.



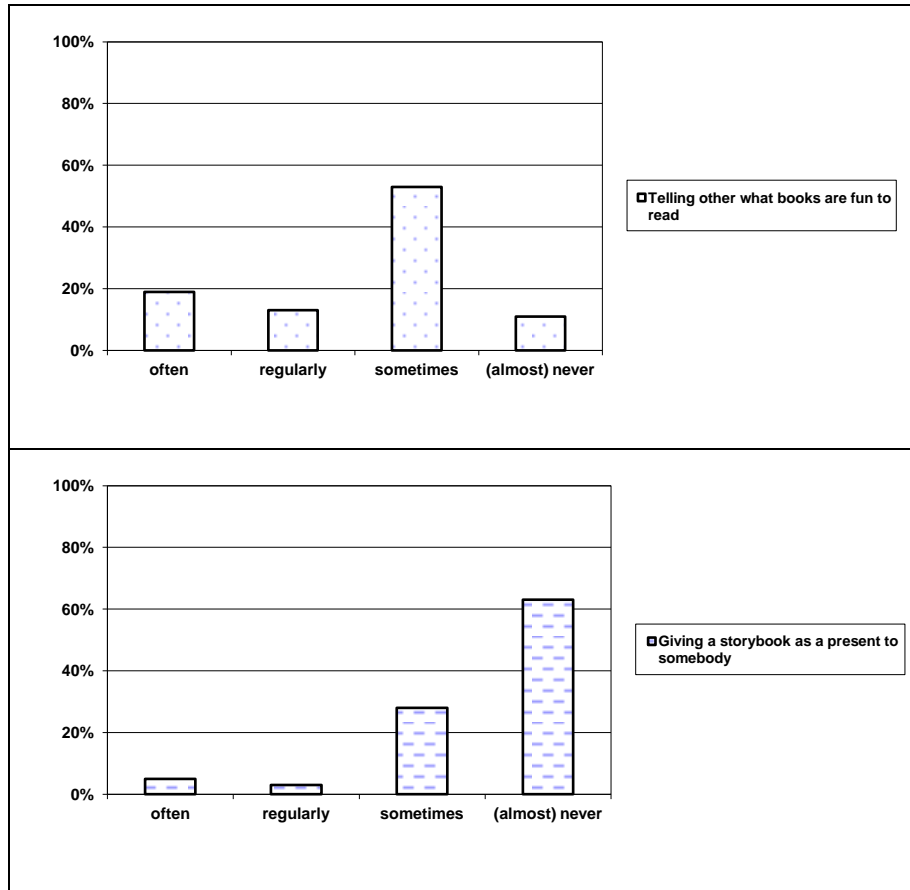


Figure 11: Perceived implicit social norm of the teacher  
 (“How often does this happen with your teachers”)

According to the students, their teachers do not talk to them about storybooks very often: *sometimes* (for 50% of the students) and *almost never* (for 38% of the students). Telling others what books are fun to read happens *sometimes* with 53% of the teachers and *often* with 19% of the families. Teachers do not give storybooks as a present very often, that is, *sometimes* for 28% and *almost never* for 63% of the teachers.

The students were also asked to indicate how their teachers feel about reading as a leisure activity. Again a positive picture emerged (see Figure 12). Most of the teachers consider reading books a *good* leisure activity (52%) or *one of the best* leisure activities (31%).

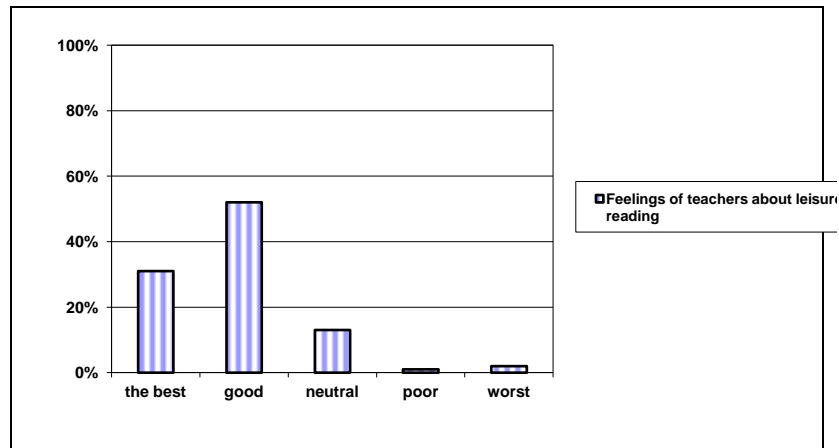


Figure 12: *Perceived explicit social norm of the teachers*  
 (“How do your teachers feel about reading books as a leisure activity?”)

#### Degree of social pressure

Now that more insight has been gained into the social norm perceived by the students as being set by their family members, their best friends, and their teachers, the next question is to what extent the students are influenced by these opinions of others about reading. The findings are presented in Figure 13:

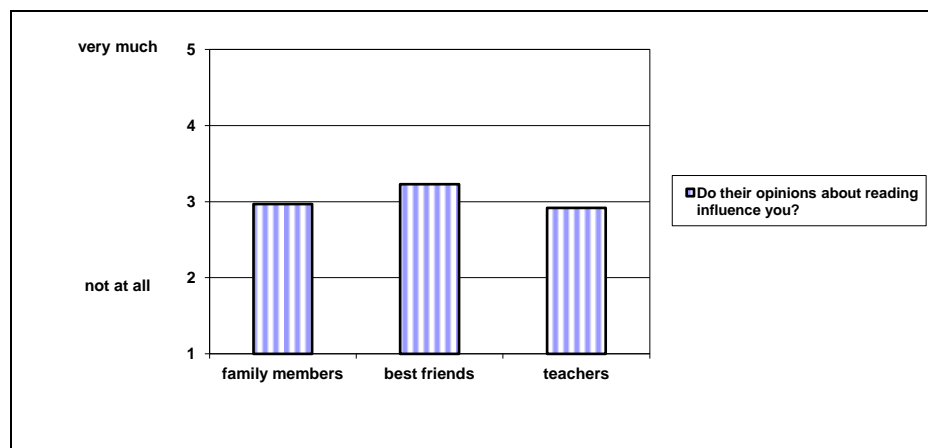


Figure 13: *Students’ compliance to the social norm of family members, best friends and teachers*  
 (“Do you let the opinions of these others about reading influence you personally?”)

The students report that to a substantial degree they let themselves be influenced by other people's opinions about reading. The social norm provided by best friends has the strongest effect on the students. Their teachers' opinions have the weakest effect.

## 4.5 Self-efficacy

### *Appropriateness of the available books*

Most of the students (71%) agree that there are many storybooks for youngsters like themselves (see Figure 14). Also, most students feel that there are enough nice storybooks around (61% of the students) and that there are many storybooks that really interest them (48% of the students).

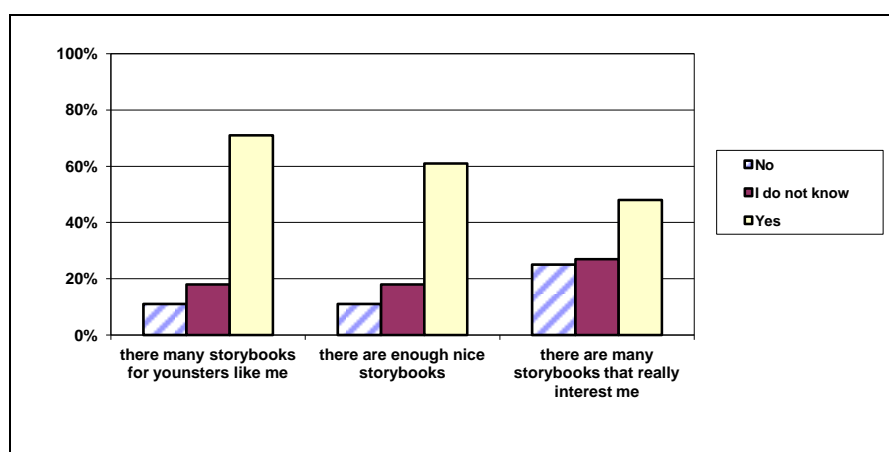


Figure 14: Available books (“Are there enough nice storybooks?”)

Figure 15 shows the degree to which the students feel that the books they have to read for school are often difficult. The students also gave precise difficulty indications, i.e., whether there are many difficult words in the books, many long sentences, and whether they have a lot of trouble understanding the text.

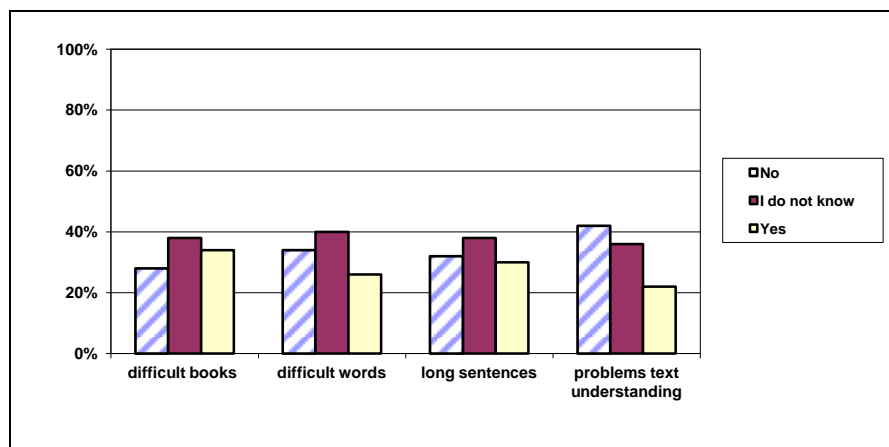


Figure 15: Available books (“Are the books to be read for school often difficult?”)

On the perceived difficulty of the schoolbooks, the student population splits up into three subgroups. Approximately one third of the students agree that books for school are difficult, one third disagree and another third of the student population do not know. Most of the problems encountered with regard to schoolbooks are the problems they have understanding the text in schoolbooks, more so than problems caused by difficulty of words and the length of sentences.

School phase	Middle school	Higher-type school	t-value	sign
Nice storybooks	3.9542 (.94515)	3.8506 (.92336)	1.351	N.S
Difficulty schoolbooks (-)	.0827 (.85606)	-.1408 (.76051)	3.326	p < 0.01
Gender	Girl	Boy		
Nice storybooks	4.0436 (.89091)	3.7577(.94348)	-3.761	< 0,01
Difficulty schoolbooks (-)	.0438 (.78575)	-.0558(.87180)	-1.461	N.S.
Boarding	Boarding	Non-boarding		
Nice storybooks	3.8967 (.95238)	3.9516(.91360)	.632	N.S.
Difficulty schoolbooks (-)	-.1090 (.74250)	.0463 (.83624)	2.153	< 0,05
Regional location	Rural	Urban		
Nice storybooks	3.7885 (.94310)	4.0027(.92478)	2.835	< 0,01
Difficulty schoolbooks (-)	-0.0477 (.82792)	0.0308(.82733)	1.178	N.S.

Table 11: Differences in perception of available books (enough nice storybooks and difficulty of schoolbooks) for differences in school phase, gender, (non-) boarding, and school region (average and s.d.). (Note: Non-difficulty)

For their perception of the available books the following observations can be derived from Table 11:



- School: With respect to the perceived difficulty of the books to be read for school, a significant difference can be found between the middle school students and the higher-type school students: the older students find their schoolbooks more difficult compared with the younger students.
- Gender: Compared to the boys, the girls agree significantly more that there are enough nice story books for them.
- Boarding: There is also a significant difference between boarding students and non-boarding students: the boarding students find their schoolbooks more difficult compared with the non-boarding students.
- Region: Students from urban schools perceive their storybooks as significantly nicer than students from rural schools.

### *Self-assessment of reading proficiency*

A student's reading proficiency may have an effect on their reading behaviour. Table 12 gives the score on the last Chinese literacy course. For the junior high students, two different literacy scales are administered by the pertinent schools: a 1-100 scale and a 1-120 scale. For the senior high students a 1-150 scale is used.

Junior high (100 max. score, N=187)			Junior high (120 max. score, N=219)			Senior high (150 max. score, N=213)	
0 - 20	-	-	0 - 24	1	1%	0 - 30	-
21 - 40	1	1%	25 - 48	4	2%	31 - 60	1
41 - 60	-	-	49 - 72	12	6%	61 - 90	32
61 - 80	52	28%	73 - 96	62	28%	91 - 120	141
81 - 100	134	71%	97 - 120	140	64%	121 - 150	39

*Table 12: Last school score Chinese literacy course*

Table 12 shows that most of the junior high students (71% and 64%) are in the highest category with their Chinese literacy score. For the senior high students it can be noted that most of the students are in the highest but one category.

In addition to their scores on the Chinese literacy course, the students were asked to indicate how good they consider themselves to be in comparison to the others in their class (Table 12).

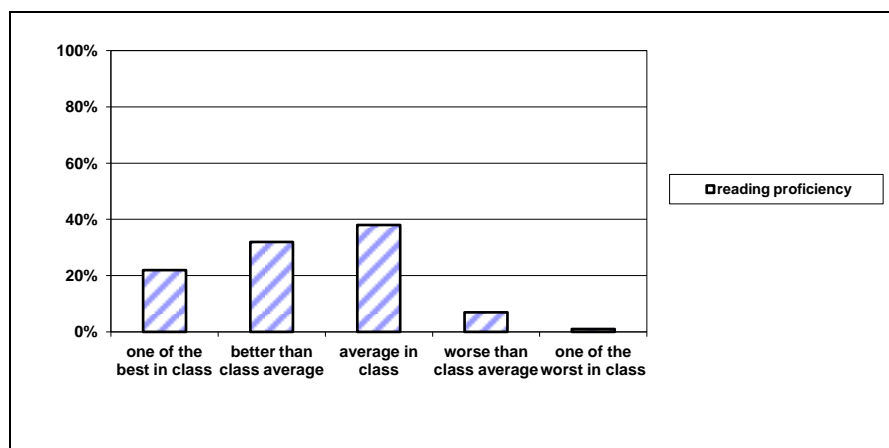


Figure 15: Self-evaluation reading proficiency (“How good at reading do you consider yourself to be compared to the others in your class?”) storybooks?”)

The students rank their literacy proficiency as being relatively high: 32% of the students report that their reading proficiency is better than the average level in the class, and 22% of the students report that they belong to one of the best in the class.

A similar observation can be made where the students were asked to evaluate their reading proficiency on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being excellent). More than half of the student population (57%) evaluate their own reading proficiency with a score of 8 or higher (see Table 12).

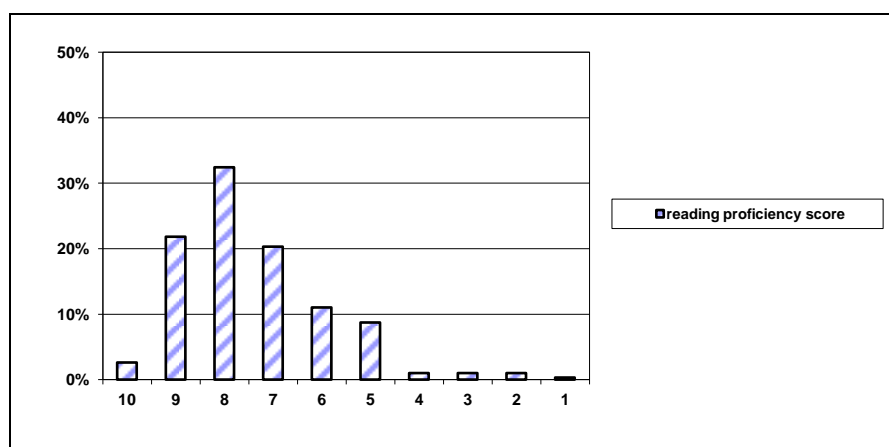


Figure 16: *Self-evaluation of personal reading proficiency score (“On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being excellent, I would like to give myself the following score on reading”)*

A more detailed picture emerges from an analysis on the factors of school phase, gender, (non-) boarding, and regional location of the school of the students. In Table 17, the two self-evaluation measures of reading proficiency (“level comparison in the class” and “10 point-score”) are taken together into one variable.

School phase	Middle school	Higher-type school	t-value	sign
Self-evaluation	.0950 (.86660)	-.1582 (.91136)	3.443	< 0.01
Gender	Girl	Boy		
Self-evaluation	.0930 (.81204)	-.1601 (1.00683)	-3.183	p < 0.01
Score literacy course junior	4.6667 (.59851)	4.2987 (.85939)	-3.325	p < 0.01
Score literacy course senior	4.0968 (.51670)	3.9398 (.68698)	-1.773	p < 0.10
Boarding	Boarding	Non-boarding		
Self-evaluation	-.0492 (.87989)	.0225 (.89755)	.837	N.S.
Score literacy course junior	4.3077 (.78905)	4.6419 (.65993)	2.987	p < 0.01
Score literacy course senior	3.9200 (.56569)	4.0581 (.61622)	1.405	N.S.
Regional location	Rural	Urban		
Self-evaluation	-0.1013 (.88914)	0.0666 (.88802)	2.293	p < 0.05
Score literacy course junior	4.4859 (.76950)	4.7381 (.44500)	2.809	p < 0.01
Score literacy course senior	3.9125 (.42676)	4.0902 (.66809)	2.368	p = 0.01

Table 17: *Differences in reading proficiency for school phase, gender, (non-)boarding), and school region (average and s.d.).*

With respect to reading proficiency, the following observations can be derived from Table 17:

School: The middle school students’ scores on self-evaluation of their own reading proficiency are significantly higher.

Gender: The girls’ self-evaluation of their own reading proficiency is significantly higher than that of the boys. And this is correct. (And this corresponds to the actual situation in reality) The scores of the girls on the Chinese Literacy course are also significantly higher. This gender difference can be noted for the middle school students as well as for the higher-type school students.

- Boarding: There is no significant difference between the boarding students and the non-boarding students in the self-evaluation of the reading proficiency. Although the non-boarding middle school students score significantly higher with their scores in Chinese literacy course.
- Region: The reading proficiency of students from urban schools is significantly higher than that of students from rural schools.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this study, the reading of books as a leisure time activity was examined. A survey was carried out among a representative sample of secondary school students in Beijing. The Theory of Planned Behaviour of Ajzen (1991) provides a useful framework for a better understanding of the factors that determine the reading behaviour of the students in Beijing. This theory consists of the following three components: reading attitude, subjective norm, and self-efficacy.

### ***What is the amount of reading done by Beijing school students?***

Secondary school students in Beijing often read in their leisure time, and much of what they read is storybooks. Typically, they will read almost every day or at intervals of a few days, spending more than 1 ½ hours per week on reading, and reading at least one book every 2-3 weeks. A more detailed picture emerges when a number of socio-demographic characteristics are taken into account: gender, age, (non-)boarding attendance and geographical location of the school. Girls read more often and more storybooks than boys do. With increasing age, the students still read a lot, but they read less often and they do not read storybooks as much. No differences in reading behaviour could be found between boarding and non-boarding students. Also with respect to the location of the school, no differences in reading behaviour could be observed between the students from urban region schools versus the students from suburban region schools.

### ***How do the Beijing students feel about reading books as a leisure activity?***

In this study, reading attitudes were seen as beliefs about the perceived instrumentality of reading fiction for attaining one's goals. The expected boon of reading books as a leisure time activity may be both utilitarian and hedonistic. The utilitarian aspects are reflected in the school function (*reading is good for school*) and the development function (*reading is good for one's personal development*). The hedonistic aspects refer to the feelings experienced during reading, that is, the pleasure function (*reading is fun*) and the empathy function (*being immersed in the world of the book*)

A clear picture emerges. Generally, the Beijing students' attitude to reading books is remarkably positive. In other words, it is clear that the students not only enjoy reading storybooks, but they also consider it a useful activity.

However, there are a number of interesting observations that can be made about the research population of Beijing students, with respect to their utilitarian reading attitudes as well as their hedonistic reading attitudes.

Firstly, there are only small non-significant differences in attitude towards reading as a leisure activity between boarding students and non-boarding students.

Secondly, the following significant differences can be observed: the younger students have higher positive reading attitudes than the older students; the girls have higher positive reading attitudes than the boys; students from urban schools have higher positive reading attitudes than students from rural schools.

### ***How can differences in leisure reading among Beijing students be explained?***

#### ***Social norms.***

A possible explanation of the reading behaviour can be found in the students' social norm, as provided by the family members, by best friends and by teachers.

The social norm here concerns an implicit norm, it concerns the degree to which members of the specified social groups talk with the students about storybooks, tell others what books are

fun to read, or give storybooks as a present, in other words the norm is set by what these others do themselves.

Although, according to nearly 50% of the students, the parents read storybooks a lot, as a whole it is clear that the implicit social norm for reading book as a leisure activity is low:

- family members *sometimes/(almost) never* talk about or give books
- some best friends *sometimes* talk about or give books as a present, but there is also a group of best friends who *often* talk about books
- the teachers *sometimes/(almost) never* talk about or give books as a present

Compared to the implicit social norm, a remarkably different pattern emerges in the explicit social norm, i.e., how the others feel about reading as a leisure activity. Most of the family members, best friends and teachers consider reading a *good / one of the best* leisure activities.

#### *Compliance to the social norm.*

What is the actual effect of the implicit and explicit social norms on the reading behaviour of the students? A summary of the statistical analysis is given in Table 18.

	Implicit norm	Explicit norm:
Parents	<i>lower positive effect</i>	<i>negative effect !</i>
Friends	<i>higher positive effect</i>	<i>no effect</i>
Teachers	<i>no effect</i>	<i>no effect</i>

*Table 18: Students' compliance to the social norm provided by parents, friends, and teachers*

The students report that they are influenced more or less by these opinions of others. The differentiated picture that can be found is as follows:

- What parents and friends *do* has a *positive* effect on the reading behaviour
- What parents *say* has a *negative* effect on the reading behaviour
- What friends *say* has a *no* effect on the reading behaviour
- What teacher *do* and *say* has a *no* effect on the reading behaviour

#### *Appropriateness of the available books*

According to most of the Beijing students who participated in this study there are many storybooks for youngsters like themselves. Also, most students feel that there are enough nice storybooks around, and that there are many storybooks that really interest them.

## **6. Discussion**

“As with the rest of the world, Chinese people have come to view TV and the internet as the primary method of getting information, spending their leisure time and seeking entertainment. For a long time, however, books newspapers and periodicals fulfilled those functions. Today, the powerful media of TV and the internet are diminishing the allure of the print media so that the practice of reading seems to require protection” (Yu Hui 2007: 4)

The findings in this study among Beijing high school students in an intriguing way support and contrast with the presupposition voiced above by Yu Hui (2007).

Even though a remarkably high frequency of reading behaviour among the Beijing youngsters is reported, it is important to note that this behaviour is mainly prompted by the strong positive attitude of the students towards reading. This attitude is fed for the greater part by the explicit social norm the students are confronted with. In other words: the students read books in their leisure time because they think and because other people say that reading is good for school. Reading for pleasure is dominated by the utilitarian function and by social pressure. The pitfall here is that when the students have completed their school careers, the remaining factor, the pleasure function, only has a minor stimulating effect on reading books as a leisure activity.

This study also support findings from large-scale recent surveys on the development of Chinese children (eg. Sun 2003). Parents’ expectations are high and the burden of studying is heavy. Children are seldom able to spend their spare time doing what they enjoy doing. For the Chinese children to grow up happy, as in the rest of the world, it is important to create a relaxed environment (cf. Ying 2003).

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